SCHOLAR-PRACTIONER

Omnilinguistic Pedagogy

Dana L. Burgess

is the Anderson Professor of Humanities and Classics at Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA. He received his Ph.D. in Ancient Greek and his M.A. in Latin from Bryn Mawr College; he also holds an A.B. in Literature from Bard. In recent years, Professor Burgess has developed an interest in serving students for whom English is a second language, and in 2013, he completed a Master of Arts in TESOL from the School for International Training (SIT) in Brattleboro, Vermont. During Fall 2015, he taught EFL composition and classics at the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka. His current scholarly interests lie in linguistics and language pedagogy.

Most language instruction concentrates only on the target language. If learners share a first language, instruction may refer to that. The target language is approached as a medium for communication rather than as an object of inquiry in its own right. Many language learners are unaware of the structures of their first language since those were learned intuitively rather than analytically. The study of human language itself can reveal to learners the structures of their first language, the differences between the first language and the target language, and the ways in which both are parts of a larger system of human language. Protracted attention to non-target languages may not be wise for beginning-level instruction, but even a rudimentary exposure to the complexities of human language can help all language learners understand the task they are undertaking.

Language typology studies the different ways languages are structured. Unrelated languages may show similarities of structure, and some closely related languages show surprising differences. Parametric theory treats these differences individually and examines how one difference interacts with another. Together, language typology and parametric theory reveal both the diversity of natural human languages and their fundamental unity (Baker, 2001), (Tallerman, 2011), (Payne, 2011). Languages differ in the number and type of morphemes per word, the order and marking of heads and dependents, and a huge range of phonological attributes (Haspelmath, Koenig, & Oesterreicher, 2001). This impressive diversity exists alongside the fact that any neurotypical child can learn any natural human language. I have coined the phrase "omnilinguistic pedagogy" to refer to the teaching of that single system of world language as part of instruction in English for speakers of other languages. The terms "plurilinguistic pedagogy" and "multilingual pedagogy" refer to an attention to learners' first languages as they learn another (García & Flores, 2012), (Burkett, Todeva, & Turpin, 2007). I intend omnilinguistic pedagogy also to include exposing learners to unfamiliar languages, which they will never learn in detail, but which will help them see how human language operates. A gentle study of linguistics can help learners acquire a new language.

The diversity of natural human languages offers teachers and learners a valuable resource for contrastive analysis. Thornbury (2013) argues for the advantages of helping learners consider how different languages express ideas. Indeed, we might see contrastive analysis as a multilingual version of "grammaring" (Larsen-Freeman, 2003), the dynamic analysis of how a change in form necessarily entails a change in meaning and use. Scheffler (2012), cited by Thornbury above, argues, "...there is growing empirical evidence that contrastive L1–L2 explicit information may be necessary if learners are to master certain difficult L2 structures." Scheffler is rightly concerned to avoid L1 transference.

Omnilinguistic pedagogy, giving attention to languages which are neither a target nor an L1, may not prevent L1 transference, but it will make learners aware of the differences between languages. Just as plurilinguistic pedagogy can be of value for its use of contrastive analysis, so can omnilinguistic pedagogy, with its access to all natural human languages.

I here propose specific language structures that might be addressed by an omnilinguistic pedagogy. The sequence below is determined by two sometimes conflicting criteria. On the one hand, the structures are selected and organized to reveal the hierarchy of linguistic parameters (Baker, 2001). On the other hand, the structures are arranged with an eye toward a reasonable pedagogic sequence, with one structure logically leading to another.

Synthetic natural languages, like German, Mohawk or Turkish, make meaning by compounding many morphemes (often including inflectional morphemes) into a single word. Even languages which are only partially synthetic offer a means of teaching inflection, compounding, and even collocation. English is only weakly inflected, but many languages do show some form of inflection, especially verbal inflection. That means that many learners' first languages include verbal inflection for person, number, tense, mood, or voice. Other semantic and grammatical categories have verbal inflectional reflexes (Bickel & Nichols, 2011), including evidentiality (Tuyuca), honorificity (Japanese), and transitivity (Fijian), so learners can be exposed to unfamiliar types of verbal inflection that can make them more aware of those processes in their first language and more conscious of the ways that their L1 is different from English, with its relative paucity of inflection. Noun inflection, nearly wholly absent in English, has been helping native English speakers understand syntax for hundreds of years through the study of Latin. Just as learners may never have thought about the category of evidentiality, so may they never have thought about the grammatical functions of subject, object, indirect object, and agent. The fact that English has so little inflection for verbs or nouns means that studying inflection can help learners see grammatical characteristics that might otherwise remain unnoticed.

Studying inflectional morphemes can lead to the study of derivational morphemes, which are extremely important for building vocabulary in English. As learners develop skill using suffixes and prefixes, they become better able to interpret language in a variety of registers. Learners are empowered when they begin to be able to tear apart unfamiliar words and make intelligent guesses about their meanings.

Omnilinguistic pedagogy works toward agility rather than toward the acquisition of information, but that agility can show learners how to go about acquiring the information they need.

As learners become more familiar with how meaning is made within a single word, they are considering the kinds of relationships that inform syntax. "Infelicitous" begins with a negating prefix and ends with an adjectival suffix; "Not making happy" similarly begins with a negating morpheme and ends with an adjective working as an objective complement. Learners can transfer their morphological understanding to a syntactic understanding as they develop an appreciation for the ways parts of language work together to make meaning. This skill is fundamental to the agility omnilinguistic pedagogy pursues.

The relation of heads and dependents is one of the language fundamentals that can show the unity of human languages (Tallerman, 2011). All human syntax includes government, the mechanism by which one word my regulate words dependent upon it, as a preposition governs its object. (Comrie, 1989). Learners of English can see how government works in English by comparing that to their own first languages and by comparing both to unfamiliar languages. Head directionality will be especially important for English learners whose first language is head-final, such as Tamil or Japanese, but an awareness of head directionality can help any English learner grasp the grammatical concept of the head/dependent relationship. Prepositions are a category that gives English learners much difficulty (Lorincz & Gordon, 2013), but the relationship between the preposition and its object is vivid. By encountering the question of head directionality in the abstract, head-final language speakers can come to see the linguistic importance of government itself.

Argument structure and valency theory address the relations of the most fundamental elements of clauses: subjects, objects and verbs. This is often closely connected to head-directionality and can logically follow as a topic for inquiry. Argument structure provides an opportunity to introduce a diachronic analysis, for English moved from SOV to SVO within the historical period (Burchfield, 1985). Learners can read Shakespeare to find some SOV word order and can read Chaucer to see significantly more. An appreciation for the reality of historical linguistic change, especially as regards argument structure, will help learners avoid panic when they encounter archaic diction in a contemporary text. Native speakers of SOV languages can observe the historical change in the

argument structure of English. Ideally, SOV language speakers could also confront other systems, such as the VSO structure of Welsh, to develop an appreciation for the importance of argument structure (Dryer & Haspelmath, 2011). Becoming vividly conscious of their own first language's argument structure lets learners see both the diversity of human languages and their fundamental unity.

Multilingual and plurilinguistic pedagogies laudably respect the linguistic resources learners bring into a classroom and the linguistic resources of the learners' country or region. An omnilinguistic pedagogy seeks to respect the diversity of world languages, including dominant and non-dominant languages, and including dominant and non-dominant discourse communities within a single language. An omnilinguistic pedagogy exposes learners to human language as a singular entity and uses a consideration of the structures of unfamiliar, little-spoken, and even dead languages to expand learners' awareness. Omnilinguistic pedagogy makes the most sense for advanced learners already literate in one language; I suggest, however, that a limited omnilinguistic approach may be of value in lower-level contexts as well. Prescriptive grammar instruction may be intimidating to learners, who might feel that their own linguistic resources are insufficient to the task of learning a second language. Omnilinguistic pedagogy, revealing the diversity and unity of human language, may help learners appreciate the breadth of human linguistic resources and the value of their own participation within the linguistic community.

References

Dryer, M. S., & Haspelmath, M. (2011, Jan. 1). World Atlas of Language Structures Online. Retrieved July 8, 2013, from World Atlas of Language Structures Online: http://wals.info/

García, O., & Flores, N. (2012). Multilingual pedagogies. In M. Martin-Jones, A. Blackledge, & A. Creese, The Routledge Handbook of Multilingualism (pp. 232-246). New York: Routledge.

Haspelmath, M., Koenig, E., & Oesterreicher, W. (2001). Language Typology and Language Universals. Berlin, DEU: Mouton de Gruyter.

Larsen-Freeman, D. (2003). Teaching Language; from Grammar to Grammaring. Boston, MA: Thomson, Heinle.

Lorincz, K., & Gordon, R. (2013, March 25). Difficulties in Learning Prepositions and Possible Solutions. Linguistic Portfolios, 1(14), 1-5.

Payne, T. E. (2011). Understanding English Grammar. New York: Cambridge.

Scheffler, P. (2012, December). Theories pass. Learners and Teachers Remain. Applied Linguistics, 33(5), 603-607.

Tallerman, M. (2011). Understanding Syntax (3rd Edition ed.). London, UK: Hachette.

Thornbury, S. (2013, January 27). C is for Contrastive Analysis. Retrieved July 8, 2013, from An A-Z of ELT: http://scottthornbury.wordpress.com/2013/01/27/c-is-for-contrastive-analysis/